DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 192 396 CS 503 032

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TITLE The New Media as Contexts for Creativity.
PUB DATE Sep 80
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the International Institute of Communications (Ottawa, Canada, September 7-11, 1980).

EDRS PRICE MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS *Communications; *Creative Expression; Film Industry; Futures (of Society); *Mass Media; Radio; *Technological Advancement; Television; *Video Equipment

ABSTRACT

A brief review of the development of such media as film, television, and radio reveals a pattern that can be applied to the new media of cassette and cable television, videotex and videodisc. The pattern is that while each new electronic invention at first provided familiar material through a novel device, it eventually brought into existence a new set of creative professions and broadened the aesthetic or informational experience of the audience. There is a connection between a technology and its content, and the latter in time comes to influence the whole growth and capitalization of the technology. Constraints in the establishment of new media include the general belief that the possible role of the medium is already filled and the need to accustom the audience to a new level of necessary wastefulness of time or money. It is impossible to predict what will emerge as the content of the new distribution media, but there is an optimism that the new media will facilitate the growth of creative professions based on the technical capability of a single person to make an entire feature film, for example, and on the current phenomenon of the independent producer interested in working apart from the organizational machinery of the film and television industries. (AEA)

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THE NEW MEDIA AS CONTEXTS FOR CREATIVITY

Prepared for the 1980 Annual Conference of the
International Conference of Communications
Ottawa, Canada

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Discussion Group 5
Session B

CS503032

THE NEW MEDIA AS CONTEXTS FOR CREATIVITY

We have all learned a great deal in the course of the last fifteen years concerning the constraints which accompany the spread of new media, if these are broadly defined as distributive systems. We have seen both cassette and cable fail to materialise in the period when the most elevated social optimism surrounded them but then appear to reach a genuine take-off at a moment when they seemed ready to serve a set of more humdrum social needs. We have discovered that the mere capacity to offer interactive two-way communication does not lead to a renewal of democracy, nor generate a demand for hardware; real changes cannot be generated by electronic equipment, although it can be introduced perhaps and encouraged as a by-product of some other service. The new media are providing, on the whole, familiar material through novel devices; as they establish themselves they may succeed in changing a social value or altering some deep-rooted aspect of a society, so long as there exists some general unconscious desire for this. Social optimism (and sometimes social pessimism) has been constantly revised downwards as each new communications hardware has emerged. One has only to think of the contrast in the hopes surrounding CATV today ten years after the publication of the Sloan Commission report, "On the Cable".

However, each of the new media of the present century has eventually brought into existence a new set of creative professions and has broadened the aesthetic or informational experience of the audience. All of them have helped to re-shape the economic context within which journalists, storytellers, musicians, plastic art of many kinds have come to function. There is evidently a relationship of some kind between the take-off of a new distribution system and the arrival or recognition of a new need to express a range of material in a new way. Within a decade or two of the establishment

of a new medium it becomes absurd to attribute the new creative element - the new genre - to a mere technological origin: for example, to say that the rise of the novel was the result of the Stanhope all-metal printing press. Nonetheless, there is a connection between a technology and its content, and the latter in time comes to influence the whole growth and capitalisation of the technology. Moreover, the linkage is inescapably connected with prevailing aesthetic theories and political ideas, which themselves influence both the conceptions behind the technology and the conceptions behind the content.

Let us take the example of impressionist painting. Its arrival as a style in the late 19th century had a great deal to do with new ideas concerning optics as well as beliefs on the part of artists about the development of realism. The phenomenon, however, had also a great deal to do with the invention of screw-top paints, which enabled artists to take a large range of colours right into the landscape which they were painting. They began to register the phenomenon of colour in a different way from the days when more of the work was studio-bound. They were also influenced by the presence of new publics for painting and new perceptions of the location of the artist in society. The links between an enabling technology and a genre or style are based upon mutual causation, so complex as to be unfathomable but perhaps clear enough to perceive at the earlier stages of a specific medium when all of the influences are in flux.

Cable, like several media before it, suffered from a false start. There was, in the 1960's, a great deal "in the air" about interactive democracy, the "new politics" of community action and "talking back". Nonetheless, the medium was stillborn. Money was lost. Predictions were falsified. It is 1980 and we have no interactive telecommunication devices in our homes, apart from Columbus, Ohio and Higashi Ikoma and perhaps one or two other

places where a few dozen people are provided, at hideous expense, with a strange and apparently unnecessary extra button or two. The cable has indeed started to develop as a deliverer of films, as a substitute for the cinema. It is still too soon to say whether this material alone will be enough to turn cable into a mass medium in many countries. Cable is a partially delivered promise at present and the other new media have not even progressed that far, as yet. The quantum leap which every new medium must make in order to embed itself in the culture has not yet been made by any medium since television, which made its leap, a quarter of a century ago, and that was twenty years after its actual invention.

There has always functioned one constraint, supportive of all the others present at the birth of each new communications technology - the general belief that the possible role of the new medium is already catered for. Radio and television both appeared to have no role to fulfil in the field of news, because the newspaper had already been invented. Cinema appeared to be invincible to the crude imaging of the domestic receiver (it still does, to some). The theatre appeared impregnable to the flickering images of Lumière (indeed, he thought so himself). Generally, this belief remains alive long after the establishment of the new medium in a new and specialised role. The challenge to existing media comes later and then they in turn have to specialise and give ground to the newcomer. Some time in the next two decades, the newspaper will go through this routine in response to videotex (or its more sophisticated successors) and film will come to terms with more sophisticated kinds of tape, although it may remain a useful medium for a very long time to come, since it alone is able to play into the whole range of new videogram technologies and is not subject to problems of compatibility.

The greatest constraint of all in the establishment of new media is accustoming the audience to a new level of necessary

wastefulness, either in terms of their time or their money. Most of the content of most newspapers is of no interest to most readers who choose their newspapers for mysterious socio-economic reasons in those communities who afford choice at all. Most long-playing records are never in fact played at all. Most books which are sold are not read in their entirety and if read once are seldom opened again - they continue to take up space. The pleasure afforded by purchase of the software has to become a value in itself and has to be purchasable for relatively small sums of disposable income. Sheer cost of browsing is currently one of the major drawbacks of videotex and the cost of purchasing cassettes and videodiscs is the main hindrance to the development of these systems. The Victorian lending library was the main support of 19th century publishing and lending systems for videogram material might prove to be the mainstay of certain kinds of video-publishing, although the risk of illicit copying will automatically cause the witholding of a very large section of the potential material. The establishing of new media, as has been said, is seldom a source of renewed social optimism. Cassettes will be bought in large numbers when they are cheap enough to buy without actually reading them and pretty enough to store without using. Within the market there must be large areas of redundancy surrounding a core of devoted specialist publics.

In the early decades of a new medium the backlog of a previous medium becomes the mainstay. Thus, the first forty years of printing saw the copying of the entire corpus of classical texts, all 40,000 of them. Radio passed through a period of dependence on music hall, on gramophone records, until it established its own genres - and then again became dependent upon discs. The videogram is clearly basing its first period of growth on the circulation of classic movies, as is the cable and probably also satellite television. We cannot yet see which new genres will spring into existence as the <u>new</u> content of these

distribution media, which will give real meaning to the media in the sense of expanding the mental and emotional lives of the audience. Siegfried Kracauer once pointed out that abstract painting was not anti-realist, so much as a realist revelation of the "nature of contemporary mental processes". What will give life to the new media is not the discovery of a further backlog of re-usable cultural artifacts, but the discovery of a new technique, dependent upon one or other of these new media, which will seem to speak directly into the unconsciousness of the contemporary audience. Moreover one would expect to see the new successful modes of content prefigured in artistic movements present in the previously established media.

It is perhaps relevant to point to the new "independent" movements springing up in all of the societies with well-established national television services. It is precisely those societies which appear to breed the creative frustrations which motivate the new workshops and community film groups throughout western Europe, Australia and North America. It is necessary to explain how it is that the great media of the century have driven certain categories of artist to the margins, so to speak and given them the appearance of irrelevance to the "mainstream" audience and its needs. The arguments which have preceded the new fourth television channel in the United Kingdom have brought out these tendencies of television (and film) as they currently exist.

Both the film and television industries have grown up around the dual principle of incorporation of audiences and artists. The broadcast signal, for reasons of scarcity and control, has been entrusted to registered institutions with a contrived suzerainty over a specific public. The film industry had earlier been constructed upon a physical counterpart of this system, whereby chains of cinemas held the audiences, neighbourhood by neighbourhood, and the groups of film-makers depended upon this arrangement. In both systems of mass entertainment there

existed always an "independent" sector, but it consisted at base of people who were trying to define themselves differently in relation to the dominating structures rather than break loose from these. The immediate constraints upon production have always appeared to be "technological"; the cinema and television required equipment of given size and scope, requiring given levels of manning, etc. However, the technology which evolved in service to these two great industries was itself locked into the same mass systems, and, indeed, the same capital. The 19th century novel had grown - in great measure - along similar principles, with an industrialised publishing industry dependent upon a distribution system which grew alongside recognised publics and generated the same set of mutually balancing constraints. The salons of 19th century Paris offered a similar model in the domain of painting, though far more loose in its consequences and creative implications. Inevitably, with all of these systems, the prevailing aesthetic considerations emerged from what had at the time the feeling of being the necessary and inevitable dimensions of the respective media.

In looking at the extraordinary pluralistic optimism which surrounds the new media of the 1980's, from videotex to videodisc, satellite and "open" channels, it is worth remembering the contrasts with the founding years of film, radio and television. Marconi wanted at one point to have all the radio equipment, constructed under his patents, to be operated by his own personnel. The Motion Picture Patents Company of the United States attempted to maintain total control of all film-making, as well as the production of film equipment and tried to keep the independents of the pre-First World War era out of the market by tying up an exclusive deal with Eastman, the stock supplier. The more competitive world of film-making which later emerged from the collapse of this attempt at monopoly, however, was founded on the same beliefs about the cinema audience, the same assumptions about their dreams and aspirations. The aesthetic of film has been monopolistic even though the sources of capital multiplied - before shrinking again. The tastes of the audience were trained to

respond to a very high-budget industry which, although it engaged in competition rather more than the television medium which succeeded it, was fundamentally monopolistic in its grasp of the cinema public. The machinery of promotion and publicity shaped a medium which deliberately avoided diversity and drove any outsider to the outermost margins of viability. To find an audience for film and later for video outside the publics controlled by Hollywood majors or national broadcasting institutions, the independent has been obliged always to operate with a different technology (16 mm or one-inch tape) and to construct a public out of diverse and usually radical fragments of a society. The documentary movement of the 1940's, the early underground of the 1950's, the avant-garde of the 1960's used 16 mm film, avoided the use of actors and constructed new distribution systems based on universities, film societies, etc. With the advent of independent and "community video" a similar process has taken place alongside an upsurge of radical artistic activity, operating according to completely different aesthetic criteria and finding no way to link itself to the major institutions which, through technological and often legal privilege, maintained an almost total domination of the main audience. The contrasting aesthetic of the independents who emerged in both media was the basis of their survival and the cause of their continuing separation from the mainstream - both at the same time. The world of mass culture of the 20th century has added new meanings to the term "professional" and new and constricting separations between the "professional" and the "non-professional". What the new technologies of production and of distribution of the 1980's suggest (it would be premature to say "offer") is a vast flowering of new domains of artistic experience, broadening out from the narrow aesthetics of the previous avant-garde and eating into the decaying audience monopolies of orthodox film and television.

The new devices of electronic imaging by which one can, as it were, "paint" images on tape will greatly expand the flexibility of film as well as video. The moving picture will be able to explore wholly new realms of fantasy and make cheap visual operations which have been achievable in recent decades only after huge expense. Indeed, all of the new digitalised equipment will make possible the making of films, even major ones, at a fraction of present costs, although certain kinds of very high budget cinema will certainly survive. An altogether new versatility is coming into independent film-making as a result of these new techniques, based for the most part upon the addition of the computer to the tasks of making moving pictures. For example, it is possible to take a photo-realist image and "animate" it as if it were a drawing. It is possible to create crowd scenes without crowds and do "stunt" filming without doing stunts. The complex techniques of "matting" can be cheaply side-stepped. The moving picture is approximating towards the <u>total</u> flexibility of the spoken word.

The admixture of these techniques with the growing phenomenon of the independent with a creative mission to outwit the organisational machinery of the film and television industries could turn out to be the bedrock of the new genres which could spring from the new media. A new individualism could return to the art of the moving image, since it is theoretically possible for a single person to make an entire feature film alone, just as he or she might write a novel. In fact, the videodisc offers the creative artist the first real opportunity to work in print and moving pictures simultaneously and might provide the first real rival medium to the book, if only suitable display screens can be developed to replace the CRT. The disc could thus provide the opportunity to read material illustrated by coloured moving pictures. The point is that all of the new sources of flexibility which are present in the technology must be developed not industrially but

creatively if the "new media" are to be worthy of their name and of the hopes which surround them. The very constraints which accompany the mass media of the mid-century have bred a series of creative frustrations and it is to these that we must look for the new aesthetic which may transform the cultural experience that the new media may in time be able to offer. The human mind is a picture gallery in which many different kinds of material may be hung; there is a limitless amount of space there and a limitless capacity to expand and alter experience. It is a pity that we concentrate so much on the development of hardware ignoring the ways in which technologies of culture, in historical practice, emerge from artistic conceptions as much as from economic or technical prognostications.